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NEWBURY CENTER MEETING HOUSE NEWBURY, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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This report is based on an inspection of Newbury Center Meeting House on the afternoon of May 15, 2006. The purpose of the inspection was to ascertain the date and original architectural characteristics of the building, the alterations that it has undergone since its completion, and its current condition and future needs.

Summary:

The Newbury Center Meeting House is one of at least three nearly identical church buildings that were constructed in the Lake Sunapee region just after 1830. The second building in the group survives as Unity Town Hall. The third, a union (multi-denominational) meeting house in South Sunapee, was reportedly demolished just after 1900, following years of abandonment and neglect. The carpenters and joiners responsible for this small but refined cluster of buildings remain unidentified thus far.

Newbury Center Meeting House retains great integrity of frame and finish, and exhibits the competence and skill of its builders. Despite some changes carried out in the late nineteenth century when the church found renewed use as a summer chapel, the building exhibits much of its original interior and exterior joinery, which represents an excellent example of late federal-period design. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, the meeting house is one of New Hampshire's most significant small religious buildings.

The framing characteristics of the building, more fully described below, reflect the "square rule" method of layout. Square rule framing supplanted the older "scribe rule" method of timber framing during the 1820s in New Hampshire. It was intended to produce greater uniformity in joints, and even some interchangeability of framing elements. The frame of the Newbury Center Meeting House was built strongly and

solidly. It remains in good condition except in areas where it was weakened by chronic leakage in the past.

The design of the building reflects a pattern of meeting house design that can be traced back in New England to the late 1700s. Together with the two companion buildings that have been identified thus far, the meeting house retains a classic architectural form even in a period when that form was being supplanted by a modified church design that better accommodated itself to the incoming Greek Revival architectural style.

Similarly, the joinery of the building retains the fully developed characteristics of the federal style, revealing nothing of the concepts or details of the Greek Revival style, which was becoming prevalent in more urban areas by the early 1830s. In form and detail, then, the Newbury Center Meeting House is a skillfully designed and built but conservative example of a rural church building. Like its companions in Unity and Sunapee, the building represents one of the last examples in New Hampshire of a religious structure that was designed and built in the pure federal style.

The following report discusses the overall form of the building, its architectural character and detailing, and its structural characteristics, in that order, and makes recommendation for the future care and treatment of the building.

Overall design and context of the building:

The Newbury Center Meeting House is the best preserved of three known structures of nearly identical design and detailing. The first of two companion structures was a union church in South Sunapee, built in 1831 and reportedly removed about 1904 after it had reached the point of collapse through neglect.¹ The second, still standing but greatly altered within and bearing a reproduced tower dating from 2001, is Unity Town Hall. This structure was built circa 1831 by the Baptist Society in Unity.² In 1877, the building was conveyed to the Town of Unity for use as a town hall, a function that it continues to serve.³

All three of these buildings, constructed within a year or two of one another, conform in design to an architectural template that was widely adopted for New England religious

¹ John Henry Bartlett, *The Story of Sunapee* (N.p.: by the author, 1941), p. 61. This book includes a photograph of the union meeting house on page 58. A clearer original photograph, dating from July 1896, is in the collections of the New Hampshire Historical Society. This print shows the relationship of the meeting house to a nearby cemetery and to a rail crossing of the Concord and Claremont Railroad, which passed just to the west of the building. Further mention of the South Sunapee meeting house may be found in Albert D. Felch, "Sunapee's Anniversary: Historical Address Delivered Monday, September 2, 1918," *Granite Monthly* 50 (1918):173-178. Felch states (p. 174) that the South Sunapee building was erected in 1833, and that a "similar" edifice stood at the "lower village" or Sunapee Harbor.

² Lisa B. Mausolf, National Register nomination, "Unity Town Hall [Baptist Church]," December 1984; Pew deed, Aaron Sleeper, Joseph J. Smith, and Edward Sleeper (building committee) to Jonathan Sleeper, January 1831, found in "A Church Book of Records for the Baptist Church of Christ in Unity" (New Hampshire Historical Society, 286.1778b/U58n).

³ *Highlights in History of Unity, N. H.* (N.p., 1964), p. 23.

buildings before about 1830. Most of these buildings adopted some variation of a “Design for a Meeting House,” first published as Plate 27 in the original (1797) edition of Asher Benjamin’s *The Country Builder’s Assistant*, and retained as an illustration in subsequent editions. Benjamin’s design illustrated a gable-roofed meeting house with its gable end treated as the façade. Projecting from the gable end is a shallow, gable-roofed pavilion with its cornice at the same elevation as that of the main body of the structure. The pavilion is narrower than the main building, and thus the raking edges of its gable roof lie below the elevation of the eaves of the main roof. The front of the square bell tower rises from the roof of the pavilion, while the greater portion of the tower rises from the roof of the main building, being supported by framing (described below) in each portion of the building.

This classic design was adopted for most meeting houses of the era, including several, like those in Acworth (1820), Hancock (1820), Newport (1823), and New London (1826), New Hampshire, which are much larger and loftier than the group near Lake Sunapee. The Lake Sunapee group is remarkable in retaining this standard template for buildings that had a much more diminutive scale than the average meeting house of the era. Although the size of the lost South Sunapee building is not known, the Newbury Center Meeting House and the Unity Town Hall both measure approximately 40 by 50 feet. They have two stories only on the façade, where upper windows illuminate galleries that do not extend along the sides of the auditorium. The auditoriums are lighted by three tall windows on each side of the building.

By the early 1830s, when the Newbury, Unity, and Sunapee buildings were constructed, the use of a projecting front pavilion to provide entrance doors and support the front of the tower was falling into disfavor. Beginning in the 1820s, some New Hampshire church builders began to dispense with the projecting pavilion and to place the bell towers at the front of the main roof of the building. This new design permitted the gable of the building to be treated as a closed pediment, and that treatment complemented the incoming Greek Revival style, allowing the façade to resemble the front of a temple.

Before describing the Newbury building in fuller detail, it will be useful to mention the degree to which it duplicates, or differs from, its two companion buildings in Unity and South Sunapee. All three buildings shared the architectural template described above, derived from Asher Benjamin, and presumably the 40 by 50-foot dimensions. All had or have three windows on their side elevations, filled with 20-over-20-light sashes. The Newbury and South Sunapee buildings have or had applied louvered fans above these side windows, while the Unity building has horizontal window caps.

Newbury Meeting House	Unity Town Hall	South Sunapee Meeting House
20/6 sashes in body of house (lower sashes not original); 20/20 on façade	20/20 sashes	20/20 sashes
12/8 sashes lighting gallery	Yes	Yes
Louvered fans over main windows	No; flat caps with curved brackets	Yes
Semi-elliptical door arches	No; semicircular arches	Yes
Curved brackets on main cornice and cornice of lower stage of tower	Only on raking cornices of façade and lower stage of	

	tower	Yes
Louvered fan in tympanum of front pavilion	Yes; with 6-light sash in center	Yes
Louvered fans over windows on lower stage of tower (not on rear window)	Yes	Yes
Rectangular belfry opening with balustrade	Elliptical arched opening with balustrade	Elliptical arched opening; no balustrade when photographed in 1896
Plain corner boards at belfry opening	Full Doric pilasters and entablature	Full Doric pilasters and entablature
Dome balustrade with square balusters	Lattice dome balustrade with urn corner finials	Lattice dome balustrade
Tall weathervane	Yes	Yes
Six-panel exterior doors	Yes	Yes
Granite steps across full pavilion width	Yes	Yes

Although the Newbury Center Meeting House is the better preserved of the two surviving representatives of this local group, some of the attributes of the other two structures may be useful in determining the nature of missing or deteriorated features at Newbury.

Architectural character and detailing:

General character: Just as it looks back in its form to a church building type that was being replaced by 1830, the Newbury Center Meeting House retains all the stylistic attributes of the federal architectural style at a period when new molding profiles and interior architectural features were being introduced throughout New England. A glance at Asher Benjamin's new book, *The Practical House Carpenter*, published in Boston in 1830, reveals how fully new designs for doors, door and window casings, cornices, and molding profiles had supplanted the long-familiar features illustrated in Benjamin's previous book, *The American Builder's Companion* (1806 and later editions). As Benjamin said in his preface to the new volume of 1830, "since my last publication, the Roman school of architecture [the federal style] has been entirely changed for the Grecian."

The architectural character of the Newbury Center Meeting House is strongly federal in style. Most of the molding profiles and assemblages, together with details like doors and balustrades, are fully characteristic of the federal period. Most of these features derive from, or at least duplicate, details that are illustrated in the standard New England architectural guidebooks of the period: Asher Benjamin's *The Country Builder's Assistant* (1797 and later editions) or *The American Builder's Companion* (1806 and later editions).

The architectural conservatism of the Newbury building and its companions suggests either that its builder was elderly and fully wedded to familiar older building types and details of joinery, or that the Lake Sunapee area was sufficiently rural that new ideas from urban centers had not yet penetrated the region by 1830. In any case, the Newbury building is a precious legacy from the 1830 period, preserving in its form and details the attitudes and expectations of its neighborhood at a specific point in time.

Despite its architectural conservatism, the Newbury building displays excellent workmanship. The pulpit, the gallery breastwork, the doors and casings leading from the entry into the auditorium, and the pew doors all display virtuosity in design and execution. The pulpit exhibits especially fine craftsmanship and detailing. As noted below, the complex visual effect of the pulpit and its setting were achieved with simple means, utilizing a fairly limited range of molding planes and profiles, but the overall effect achieved with these simple methods illustrates intelligence and sensitivity on the part of the joiner.

It might be noted that not every area of the building displays the virtuosity of craftsmanship seen in the auditorium, and especially in the pulpit. The front entry (stairhall) for example, is much plainer in its finish. This area also reveals the use of wood of a lesser quality, with resinous knots that have “burned” through the overlying paint. It appears that the building committee may have employed a highly skilled joiner to finish the pulpit and other focal points of the building, but delegated the finishing of more utilitarian areas of the building to a craftsman of lesser skill. If so, this practice repeats an old tradition in which joiners of special skill and experience, sometimes recruited from some distance, were employed to build pulpits in meeting houses that were otherwise finished by local craftsmen.⁴ It is regrettable that the adaptation of the Unity meeting house as a town hall, and the destruction of the South Sunapee building, have deprived us of the opportunity to compare the interior features of three buildings that were so similar in exterior design. Chief joiners (as distinct from carpenters) commonly acted as the designers or architects of buildings during this era, so it may be that all three related buildings originally had joinery executed by the same master craftsman. The same unidentified joiner is likely also to have provided the plans for the structures and probably built other fine buildings in the region.

Floor plan: The interior plan of the Newbury building, with its pulpit located at the front or entrance end of the building, is an unusual survival, but was not especially rare in the 1830 period. While we lack statistics on the numbers of religious buildings that were so appointed, there are a number of anecdotes concerning such buildings in New Hampshire. In many cases, the “reversed” plan was later altered, at some expense, to place the pulpit at the opposite end of the building, apparently in deference to an increasing consensus of what was proper.⁵

The only study to investigate the “reversed” meeting house plan in detail, and to attempt to explain its appearance and rather brief period of popularity, is Philip D. Zimmerman’s doctoral dissertation, “Ecclesiastical Architecture in the Reformed Tradition in Rockingham County, New Hampshire, 1790-1860” (Boston University, 1985), especially Chapter 5, on the “Reverse Church Plan Meeting Houses.” Despite its title, this

⁴ This occurred in Temple and Londonderry, New Hampshire, in 1783, when joiners John and Samuel Dunlap of Bedford were employed to fashion pulpits in the meeting houses of the two towns. See Currier Gallery of Art, *The Dunlaps and Their Furniture* (Manchester, N. H.: The Currier Gallery, 1970), pp. 45-52, and the Historical Society of Temple, New Hampshire, *A History of Temple, New Hampshire, 1768-1976* (Dublin, N. H.: William L. Bauhan, 1976), pp. 291-296.

⁵ Edmund W. Sinnott, *Meetinghouse and Church in Early New England* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1963), p. 102.

dissertation looks broadly for the origin of the plan. Zimmerman establishes the genesis of the plan at about 1820, but concludes that the point of origin in New England cannot now be established. Zimmerman sums up his findings with the following points:

The importance of reverse church plans to meeting house architectural history is threefold. First, the plan was widespread and significant in terms of the numbers of these buildings [that were] erected. Second, the plan did not appear in urban areas and has no known European precedent. For this reason, reverse church plans represent a rural innovation. Third, the plan directly influenced rural ecclesiastical (and schoolhouse) designs for years after it fell from favor.⁶

Zimmerman also links the placement of the pulpit at the front of the building to the evolution of church plans with two entrance doors and two aisles through the ranges of slip pews within the auditorium. Noting that earlier church-style meeting houses traditionally had three entrances in their facades, corresponding with three doors in the inner walls of their entries and three aisles in the auditorium, Zimmerman points out that

as in the earlier Reformed [Protestant] meeting houses built on the church plan, entrance to the auditorium was through a vestibule. Location of the pulpit [against the center of the inner face of the vestibule wall] limited access to the auditorium to two doors, one at each side [of the pulpit]. With the central longitudinal axis effectively blocked by the pulpit, the central aisle disappeared in favor of two aisles, each feeding wall pews from one side and center-section pews from the other.⁷

In explaining the possible origins of the “reversed” plan, Zimmerman refutes popular interpretations (to “discourage latecomers” to service, or to permit the minister to “note the comings and goings of the congregation”), and substitutes the thesis that this plan furthered the Protestant insistence that no part of the meeting house should be regarded as sanctified.

Thus, they rotated the inside arrangement, assuring themselves that their auditoriums would express no artificial sanctity. They ensured that the mere act of entering the room would undermine any sense of progressively more sacred space, since all people had to walk past the pulpit and essentially ignore it as they went to their seats.⁸

One outcome of Zimmerman’s New England-wide search for the origins of the “reversed” plan and for surviving examples of the plan is confirmation that the Newbury Center Meeting House is essentially a unique survivor, at least among meeting houses that exhibit the federal architectural style. A few other “reverse” plan meeting houses

⁶ Philip Douglas Zimmerman, “Ecclesiastical Architecture in the Reformed Tradition in Rockingham County, New Hampshire, 1790-1860” (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1985), p. 255.

⁷ Ibid., p. 252.

⁸ Ibid., p. 285.

survive, including the “Early Settlers’ Meeting House” at Leighton’s Corner in Ossipee, New Hampshire, which was remodeled in its present form, with an Empire-style reading desk between the two front entries, in 1856. But in retaining strong architectural integrity for the federal style, the Newbury building is a rare document of an architectural expression that is otherwise lost.

Pulpit design: The pulpit is a simple version of the classic New England design of the federal period, favored from about 1800 until about 1830. Prior to this time, the pulpit was generally a high paneled structure reached by a steep staircase on one side. Eighteenth-century pulpits usually have a swelling front supported on a faceted or rounded base of ogee profile but with a solid paneled wall on each side of this base. After 1830, the new Empire style called for the reading desk to take the form of a freestanding lectern, often veneered in mahogany and ornamented with turned columns. The desk was commonly placed at the center of a broad, low dais, upon which a sofa and chairs were often placed behind the desk.

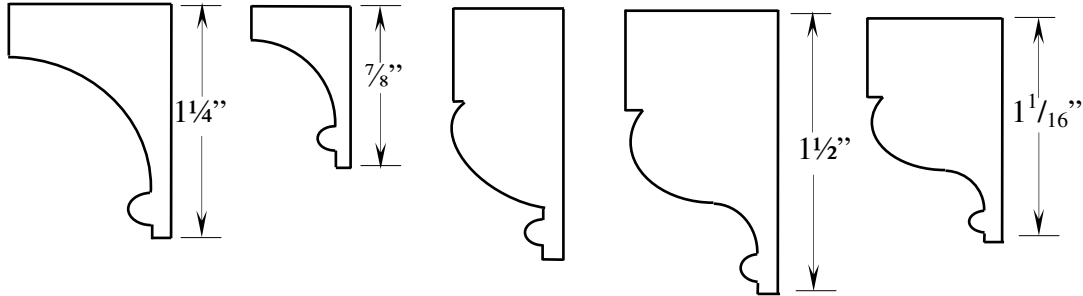
By contrast with these earlier and later designs, the federal-style pulpit was an elevated enclosure projecting from the structure behind and supported by freestanding columns rather than by a solid wall of paneling. Federal-style pulpits usually have staircases placed on each side for symmetry, as in Newbury. The enclosure may take many forms. The Newbury example is highly unusual in being treated as a drum with a series of vertical fluted members separated by grooves decorated with vertical rows of wooden balls. A fragment of a similar pulpit drum, dating from 1824, remains in the meeting house of East Derry.

Familiarity with the federal-style pulpit was disseminated principally by Asher Benjamin’s two architectural guidebooks published during this era: *The Country Builder’s Assistant* (1797 and later editions) and *The American Builder’s Companion* (1806 and later editions). The first volume shows a pulpit with in-curved sides and a flat front, supported on four freestanding columns. The second volume illustrates several designs for pulpits supported on columns, including a pattern with a rounded drum for an enclosure, used by Benjamin in his West Church in Boston (1806).

The Newbury pulpit, though an example of country joinery, is executed with great skill and is quite independent in conception from the Asher Benjamin examples except in its general form. The moldings are assembled to create an entablature above the supporting Tuscan columns. The pilasters that flank the central drum are fashioned with delicate molded bases and simple coved capitals with scalloped decoration, and their shafts diminish in width according to the rules of entasis. The upper cornice of the pulpit, which forms the reading desk, is decorated with wooden rope molding at the base of its crown molding, as are the outer arrises of the stair risers. All of these elaborately molded features are carried around the perimeter of the semicircular drum in a convex curve, while similar decorative elements at the base and top of the front of the gallery follow the gentler concave curve of the breastwork. Despite the limited number of moldings available to the joiner who fashioned the pulpit and its setting, the final result is a masterpiece.

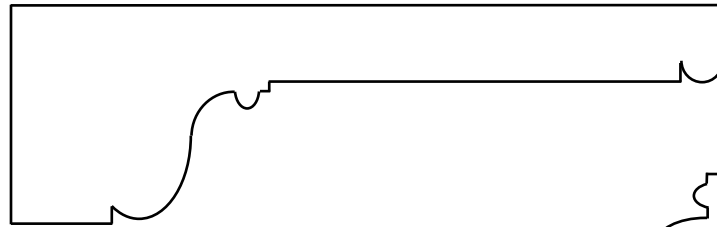
Interior joinery of the building: An examination of the features described above reveals several molding profiles that are often repeated in different combinations. These repeated elements create fully articulated architraves and entablatures, as needed to create a proper classical composition. As noted above, several of the molding profiles, made by specific molding planes, are used in various positions throughout the architectural composition. The repetition of these profiles is not noticeable amid the complexity of the overall design.

Among the moldings that are use in several locations are the following (*not to scale*):



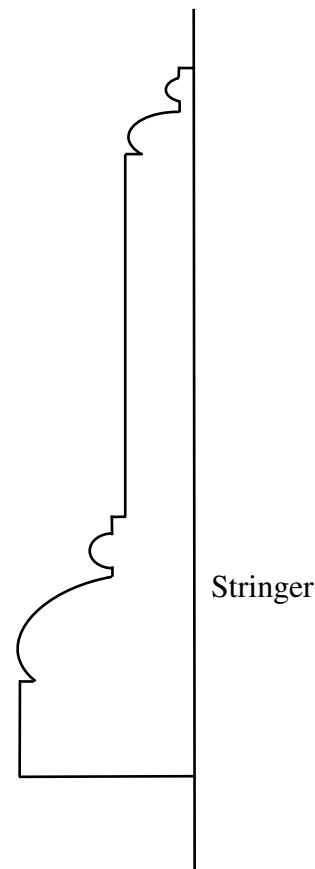
Cove and bead Cove and bead Ovolo and bead Ogee and bead Ogee and bead

These moldings are used both in standard assemblages and in more monumental and creative groupings to create features of visual complexity. Among the more standard uses of the $1\frac{1}{2}"$ ogee and bead, for example, is its application as a backband molding on the window casings of the auditorium and as door casings on the entrances on each side of the pulpit (*not to scale*):

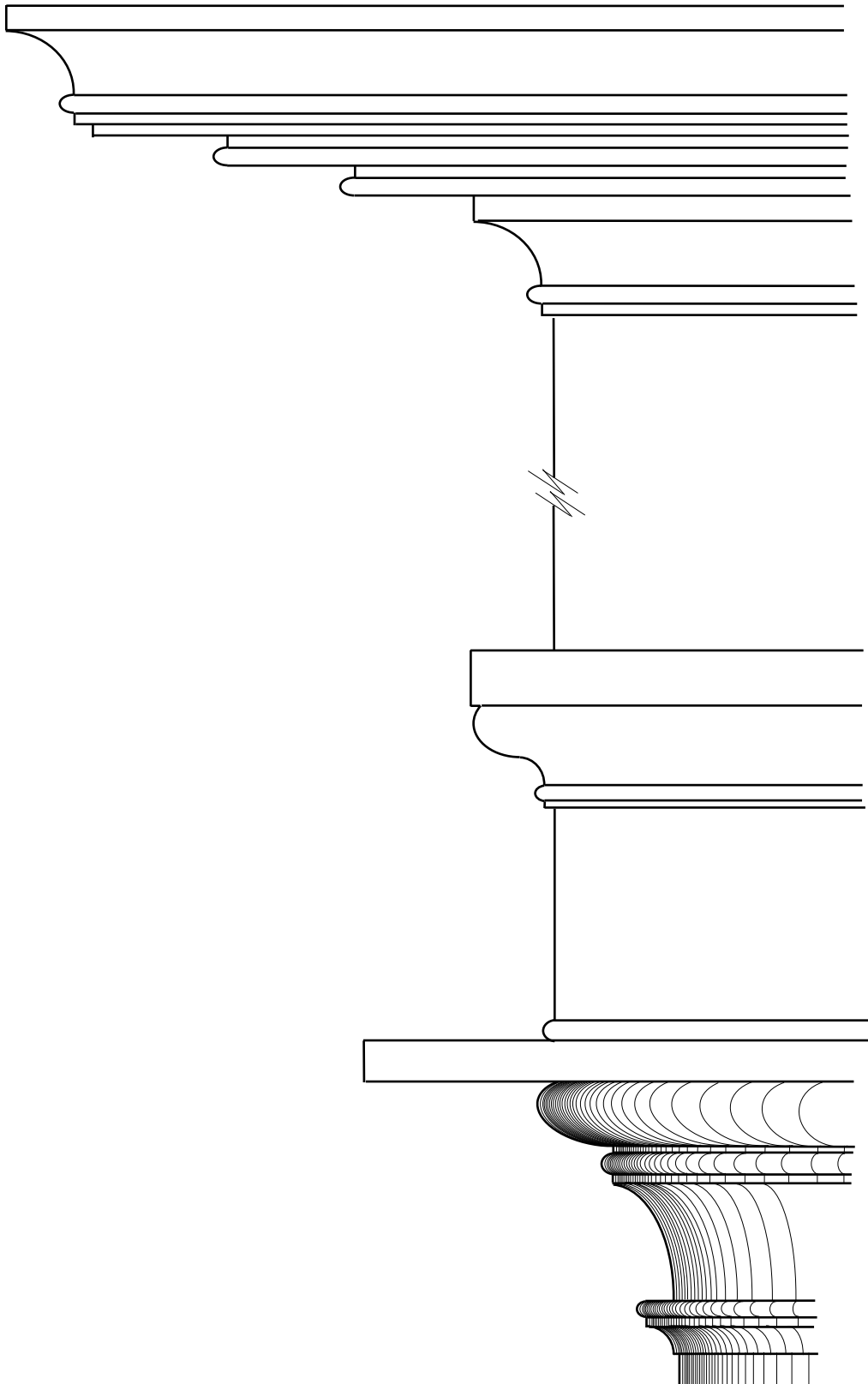


Similarly, the ovolo and bead is used in an application much like that of a backband, being applied at the slanting base of the pulpit stair stringers to create a sense of strength, support, and visual complexity for this feature of the pulpit (*not to scale*):

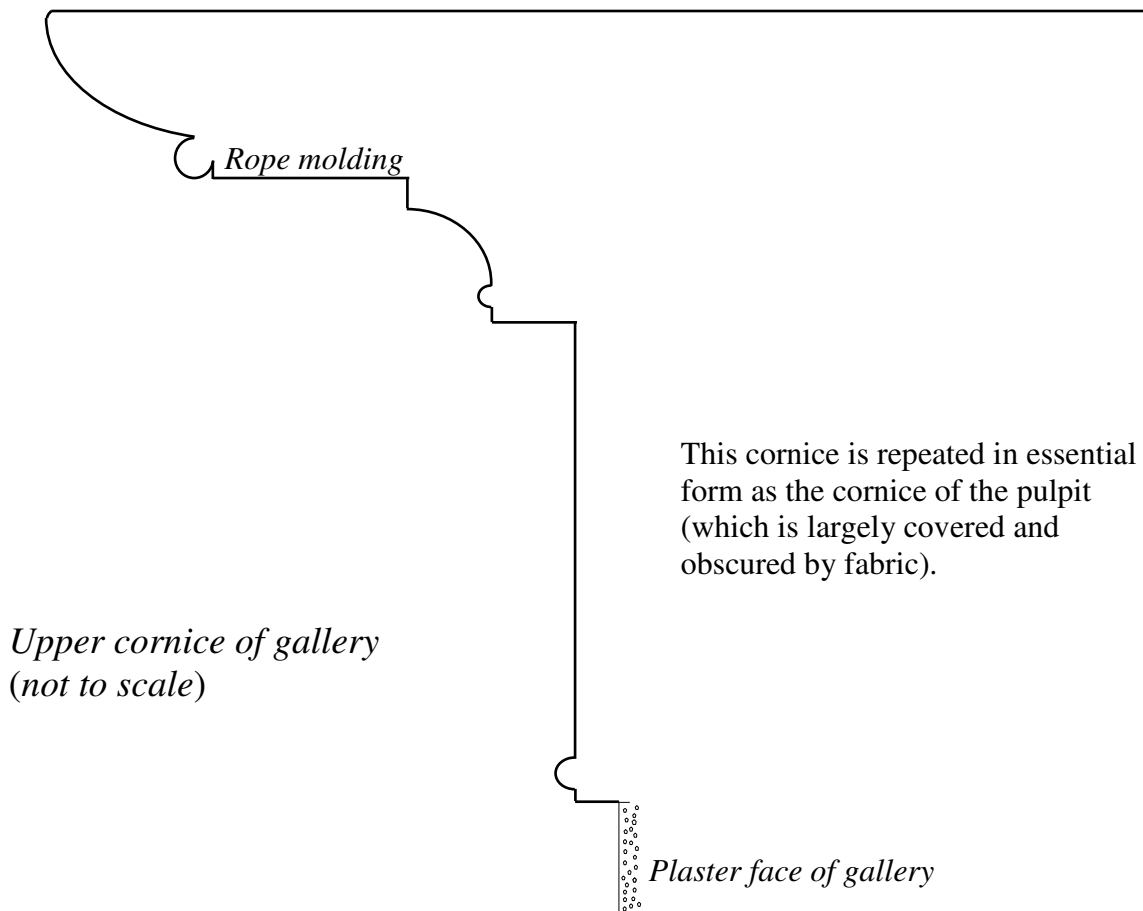
At a smaller scale, the ovolo and bead combination is used as a window stop molding, holding the movable lower sashes in alignment (see *Window sashes and trim*, below).



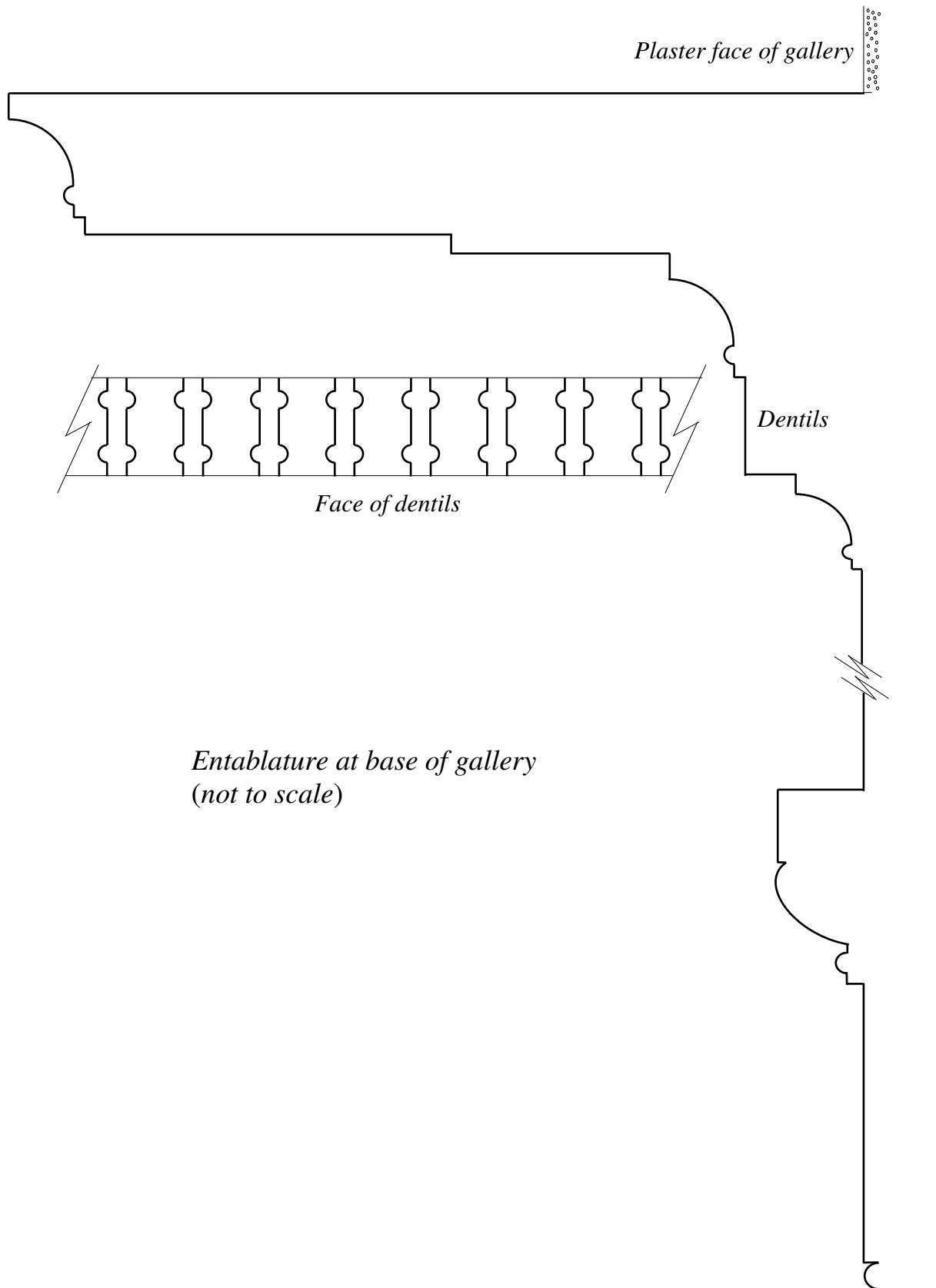
The joiner combined this relatively limited array of moldings in ingenious ways to create impressive features like the architrave that supports the base of the pulpit above the freestanding Tuscan columns. This feature is all the more impressive and difficult to execute where it conforms to the circular base of the drum of the pulpit (*not to scale*):



The same mastery of design and craftsmanship is seen in the upper cornice and lower entablature of the curved breastwork of the gallery. The upper cornice (*below, not to scale*) makes use of wooden rope molding, an element more often encountered in urban joinery of the period. Sections of rope molding are also applied vertically at the arrises of the staircase risers leading to the pulpit and as an element of the crown molding at the top of the pulpit enclosure, which forms the reading surface of the desk.

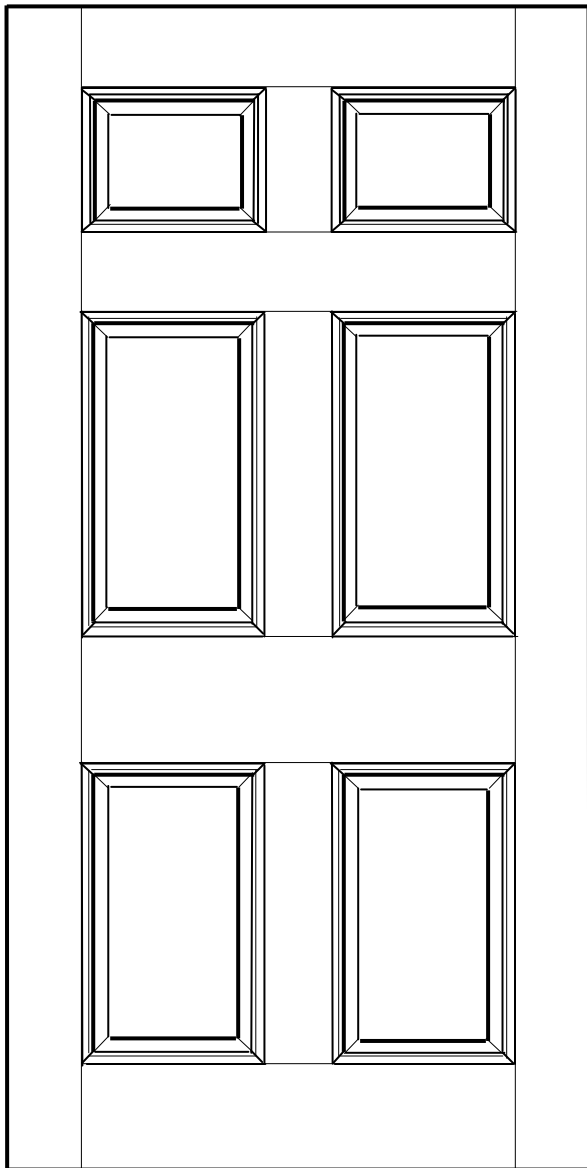


The lower wooden element of the curved breastwork of the gallery is a full classical entablature, formed with a lower architrave that uses the ovolo and bead molding described earlier, a plain 6¼"-high frieze above the architrave, and a deeply projecting and elaborate cornice at the top. The cornice utilizes the 1¼" cove and bead molding twice, as well as the 7/8" cove and bead placed as a support for a row of dentils. The dentils are unusual. They appear to have been made with a thin board into which grooves were sawn. The gap created by the grooves was then elaborated by gouging half-circular indentations into the side of the groove, as shown below. The cornice of the entablature was fastened to the underlying structure of the face of the gallery by nails that are driven into the grooves between the dentils.



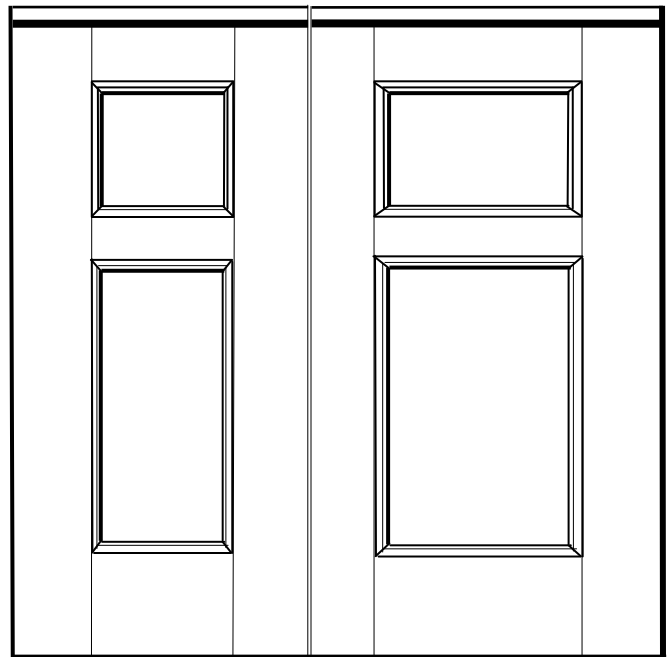
Doors: While the details of the pulpit and gallery elements express originality and the creative use of a few standard molding profiles, other elements of the interior display standard federal-style design, and might be duplicated in any well-built structure from about 1800 to about 1830. Among these are the two doors that flank the pulpit. They have their principal sides facing the auditorium when they are closed. They are characteristic of six-panel federal-style doors, with the difference that their finished sides are treated with raised panels rather than with the flat panels that are more common in this style of door.

Similarly, the two-panel pew doors exhibit typical federal-style detailing. They have the more standard flat panels on their principal sides, facing the aisles. The hardware on these doors is standard for the period: Norfolk thumb latches on the two entry doors, and pew butts, with a deep throw to allow the pew doors to open 180° without interference from the pew rails.



Pew wall

Pew door



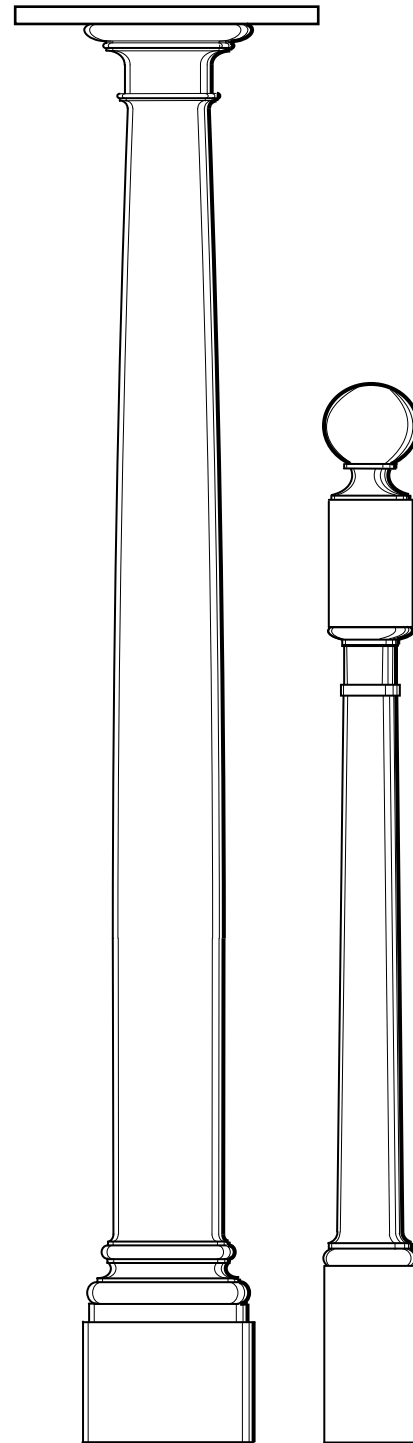
Turnings: The turnings (lathe-work) of the Center Meeting House are confined to the Tuscan columns that support the pulpit and the two pulpit newel posts. The newel posts of the two entry staircases are not turned; as noted above, the joinery of the entry is much simpler than that of the pulpit area, and may reflect a different hand.

The column and newel details could both derive from plates in Asher Benjamin's *The American Builder's Companion* (1806, with later editions).

The quality of the meeting house turnings is very high. In an age of hand- or foot-powered lathes, it was not easy to turn pieces of this scale, especially the pulpit columns, which exhibit crisp moldings and carefully executed entasis (the curved diminution of their shafts, starting at one-third of the shaft height).

The quality of these turnings suggests the hand of a professional lathe-worker, probably equipped with a water-powered shop that would have supplied the speed, torque, and control necessary to execute such large and precise features.

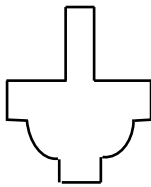
Such shops may have been available in various places along the Sugar River, but there was one location where turning was a specialty by 1830. Newport supported a significant cabinetmaking industry by this period. The large and heavy columns associated with documented examples of Newport furniture confirm the presence of turners and turning shops that could have produced the needed features for the Newbury Center Meeting House. At the time when the meeting house was being constructed, Newport supported several competing water-powered woodworking shops, in addition to supporting the production of carriages, cooperage, and other wooden products.⁹



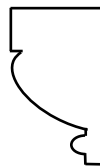
⁹ Donna-Belle Garvin, "A 'Neat and Lively Aspect': Newport, New Hampshire as a Cabinetmaking Center," *Historical New Hampshire* 43 (Fall 1988): 202-224. For a discussion of Newport's woodworking specialties, see Edmund Wheeler, *The History of Newport, New Hampshire, from 1766 to 1878, With a Genealogical Register* (Concord, N. H.: Republican Press Association, 1879), especially pp. 94-108.

Window sashes and trim: Among the treasures of the Newbury Center Meeting House are its original window sashes, which survive in remarkably good condition, especially where they have long been covered with exterior window blinds. The only losses to the integrity of the original sashes occurs in the auditorium, where the lower sashes were replaced by six-light units, apparently in the late nineteenth century.

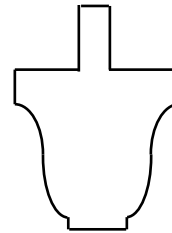
The original sashes have the typical muntin profile of the late federal period, and the replacement sashes likewise have the characteristic profile of the late 1800s or the 1900s:



Original sash profile
Not to scale



Original sash stops
Not to scale



Replacement sashes in auditorium
Not to scale

Because they have been largely protected by exterior blinds, the original sashes of the building remain in relatively good condition. They probably also retain a high number of original lights of glass. Their preservation and conservation should be high priorities.

Interior paint: The auditorium of the Newbury Center Meeting House appears to retain its original paint with only one or two subsequent over-paintings. It is remarkable to find paint of the 1830 period so little compromised by later redecorating. The surviving paint in this room should be protected from harm, and, except for gentle cleaning, should not be treated except with the advice of an architectural conservator.

The paint scheme in the auditorium is predominantly a thin and almost translucent yellow green, with certain features, such as the pulpit balustrade and the interior of the pews, painted in a contrasting thin red wash. The green hue appears to have been achieved by covering the woodwork with a thin coat of yellow, and then covering the yellow paint with a thin wash of green. It appears that the green coat was added some time after the underlying yellow, but only a microscopic examination by a specialist can determine this. It is possible that in some areas, this very subtle combination was then glazed with a thin varnish, a practice that was common in the early nineteenth century.

A few areas of the building, notably the lower front entry and the risers and treads of the stairs leading to the pulpit, appear to have been repainted subsequent to the first coats.

The survival of early paint in largely unaltered condition is rare. For this reason, the custodians of the meeting house would be prudent to have the paints examined by a

professional paint analyst to determine the sequence and nature of the colors, whether the yellow and green were applied at the same time or sequentially, and whether a glaze is present on some of the surfaces. In no case should these surfaces be covered with modern paint.

Structural characteristics:

The Newbury Center Meeting House exhibits a type of carpentry called square rule framing. This framing method was an attempt to achieve greater standardization in the joints of a building frame, in some cases leading almost to interchangeability of framing members from one position to another, something never attempted in earlier framing. The older method of framing, used since the seventeenth century without radical change began to give way to the newer method in the 1820s and 1830s. Writers of the nineteenth century, recalling the change, described it as the abandonment of the “scribe rule” method of framing and the adoption of the “square rule.”

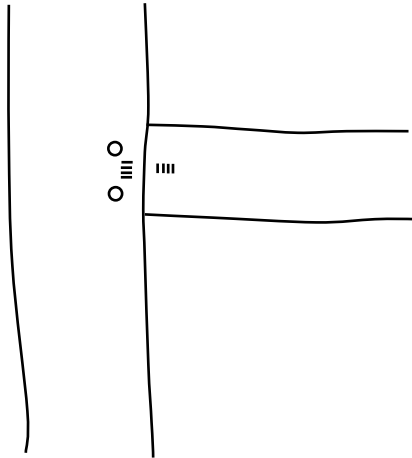
The scribe rule was the name given in the early nineteenth century to the “old fashioned” method of framing that had persisted with only minor change since the days of first settlement. In using this traditional method to build a frame, carpenters laid out the entire frame on the ground, scribing each joint with dividers and a sharp awl or knife and then carefully cutting the mortises and tenons with a variety of augers and chisels. Because a hewn timber might not be perfectly square along its length, carpenters also frequently had to true up the faces of timbers at points where the tenon of an intersecting member joined, thus ensuring that members would meet at right angles. Using a chisel or a tool called a race knife, carpenters then marked the adjacent ends of intersecting members of a frame with identical numerals, similar to Roman numerals. These marks gave a unique number to each joint, allowing the frame to be reassembled on the building site exactly as it had been laid out and cut in the carpenter’s building yard. In this method of framing each joint was slightly different even from comparable joints elsewhere in the same frame.

The new square rule method of framing, by contrast, produced a frame that tended toward standardization of parts. In this method, greater care was given to the drafting of a framing plan and the compilation of a timber schedule (a list of needed timbers) than had previously been common. With these aids, rafters, joists, studs, and other framing members could all be cut to needed sizes at different sites. When using the square rule, carpenters also prepared patterns for each type of joint, applying the patterns so that all mortises, tenons, pin holes, and other features of joints of the same type would be interchangeable. The timbers in a frame might not be exactly of the same width and depth (especially if hewn rather than sawn), but carpenters using the square rule applied their patterns with reference to lines drawn or scribed on each timber. By this means, each joint bore an identical relationship to others in the frame, even if the timbers varied somewhat in their dimensions.

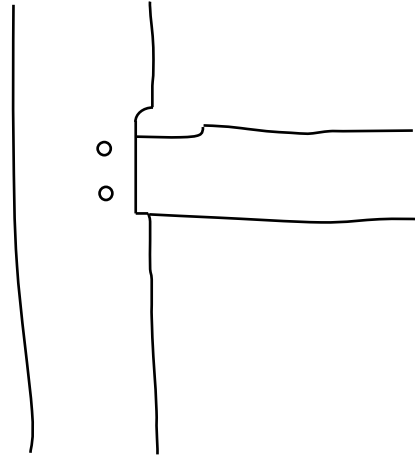
Square rule framing required that the seat of each joint be chiseled down below the irregular surface of the timber so that all the seats would conform to an imaginary “perfect” member lying just below the surface of the irregular timber. The result is a

noticeable cutting away of the outer surface of the timber at each joint, a clue that the carpenter was using the new, standardized framing method.

The difference between the appearance of a simple mortise and tenon joint made by the older scribe rule framing method and the new square rule method may be illustrated as follows:



*Scribe rule joint in
irregular timbers*



*Square rule joint in
irregular timbers*

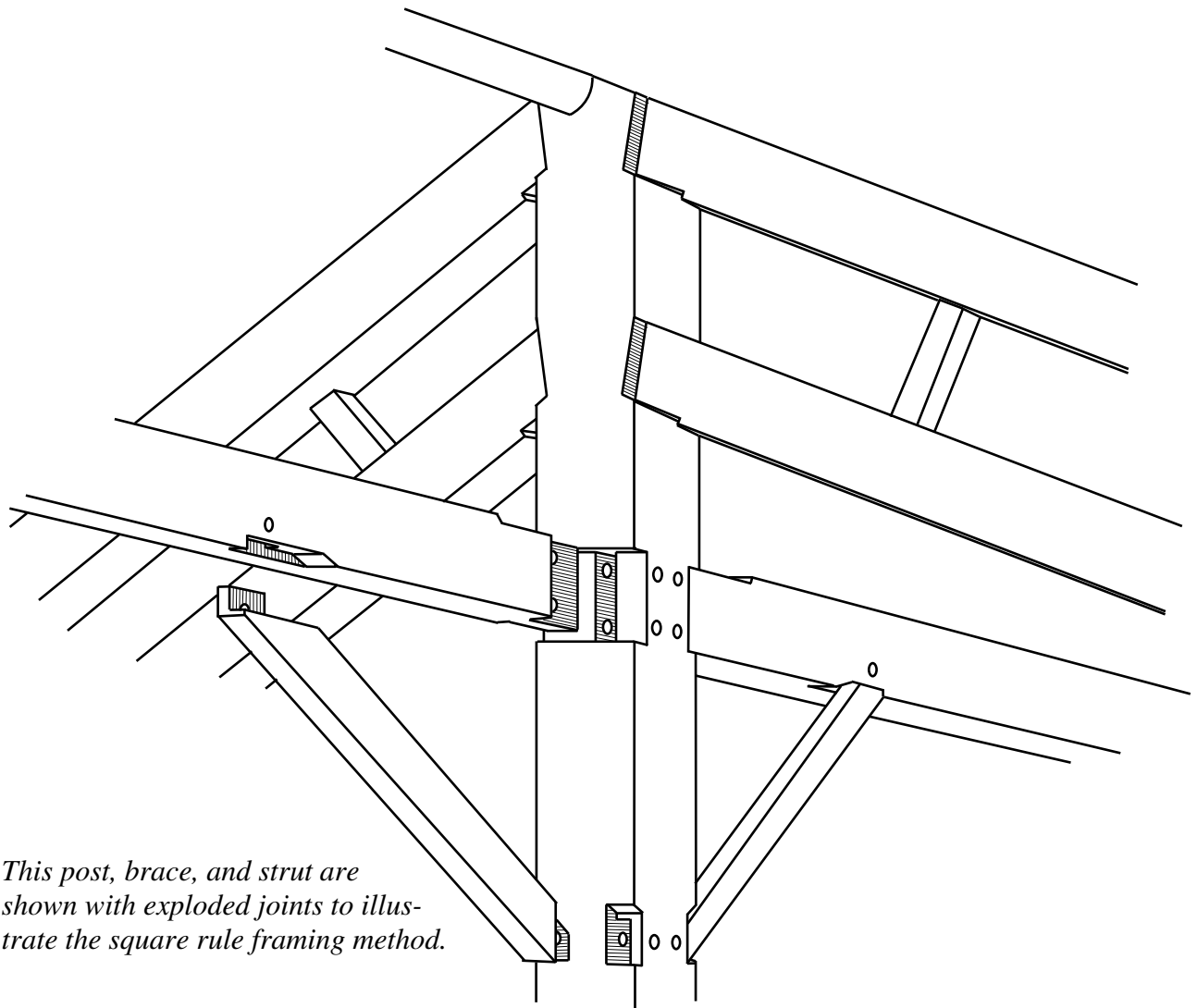
By this method of layout, all joints would theoretically fit perfectly when the framing members were brought together and erected. The term “square rule” probably derives from the dependence of the system on carefully squared joints laid out with a framing square and having standardized details.

Often, especially after 1830 or so, the laying out of such joints was eased by the fact that framing members were mill sawn rather than hewn and thus were quite regular in cross section. This is partly the case at Newbury, where the roof system is composed of a combination of sawn and hewn members. Members that were short enough to have been accommodated in a sawmill carriage, such as the front tie beam of the twenty-three-foot-wide entrance pavilion, were sawn, while members too long for a sawmill, such as the tie beams that span the forty-foot width of the main building, were hewn. In Newbury, as in most other buildings where sawn framing members are encountered at this period, even the sawn members are treated as imperfect and provided with recessed seats for the joints.

Despite the theoretical interchangeability of the joints in a square rule frame, carpenters must have had to do some fine fitting where joints, fashioned with hand tools, required some adjustment on site. This is hinted at in the attic of the Center Meeting House, where certain of the kingposts are marked in chalk with their numbers, beginning at the

back of the building. From this evidence, it appears that the builders felt that it was important to identify each of the roof trusses as a structure with unique characteristics.

The roof frame at Newbury is massive and well built, surviving in good condition except where chronic leakage in past years was allowed to continue to the point where deterioration occurred, followed by recent repairs. As shown in the perspective view of the upper end of a typical kingpost, below, evidence of square rule framing is apparent throughout the frame.



This post, brace, and strut are shown with exploded joints to illustrate the square rule framing method.

Subsequent changes to the building:

It is understood in the community of Newbury that the Center Meeting House was rehabilitated in the late nineteenth century for summer services, with support provided by summer sojourners on or near Lake Sunapee. This is verified by a clipping from the

Newport *Argus and Spectator* of Friday, October 28, 1892(?), now exhibited in the entry of the meeting house. It reads, in part:

Newbury.

Services are being held in the old church once in two weeks. Mr. Christopher and Mr. Bean, students at New London, officiate. A move has been made to have the old church repaired and quite a liberal contribution has been made, and the work has commenced. Your correspondent has not forgotten the days when the old house was filled to overflowing. We hope to see the same occurrence within the year. . . .

A search through the files of *Summer Rest*, a publication of the summer community in the Sunapee area during the 1890s, might reveal more news on the proposed rehabilitation.

The visible changes made to the meeting house during this period suggest that the building was in cosmetically poor condition, probably with much fallen plaster within and weathered paint outside. This was the era of rural depopulation in New Hampshire, with abandoned farmhouses characterizing the landscape. Not a few abandoned church buildings stood among the deserted farmlands, especially in cases where the structure had been erected by several marginal societies as a “union” meeting house with no strong denominational support. In Sunapee, both the South Sunapee meeting house and a “similar” building in Sunapee Harbor were sold or demolished just after 1900, leaving only a Methodist church in that village as an active society.¹⁰ A photograph of the South Sunapee meeting house taken in July 1896 shows what neglect could do to a fine building that was little more than sixty years old: the paint had weathered away, the window blinds had deteriorated and fallen off in many places, the tall weathervane was leaning, and there were several holes in the roof of wooden shingles, portending the end of the building a few years later.¹¹

Internal evidence in the Newbury building suggests that the following changes were made in the 1890s or subsequently:

- Removal of all interior plaster and full re-plastering over circular sawn lath. The only surviving area of original split board lath appears to be in the closet beneath the pulpit.
- Extension of the pew seats for added comfort.
- Minor floor repairs in auditorium (most areas of the auditorium floor appear original).
- Replacement of the floor in the entry.

¹⁰ Albert D. Felch, “Sunapee’s Anniversary: Historical Address Delivered Monday, September 2, 1918,” *Granite Monthly* 50 (1918), p. 174.

¹¹ The photograph is owned by the New Hampshire Historical Society, Concord, N. H.

- Replacement of the original lower sashes in the side windows of the auditorium (see *Window sashes and trim*, above).
- Possible exterior repairs.

The same campaign may have seen the first installation of the widened seat cushions and the upholstering of the cornice of the pulpit, although the present fabric is undoubtedly a replacement of any that may have been installed more than a century ago.